Of Gods, Men & Militants



Dr K L Chowdhury

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OF GODS, MEN AND MILITANTS

Om bhoorbhuvah swaha
Tatsaviturvarenyam bhargo devasya dhimahi
Dhiyo yo nah prachodayat

May there be peace in mortal, immortal and divine planes. I meditate on the brilliant splendour of the Sun God. May He stimulate our intellect and drive away ignorance.

Gayatri Mantra

For
Dhan Rani, my mother - the fountainhead
Leela, my wife - the inspiration
My family and friends - the encouragement
Kashmir, my homeland - the agony
India, my country - the soured dream
and
Nausheen, and Aditya, my grandchildren - the hope

Acknowledgement

I am grateful to Neeraj for the sketch that has caught the spirit of the poem '*Plaint to Kheerbhawani'* and to Anil Nakhasi for his two pencil drawings included in this book. They are from the new generation of promising Pandit artists in exile.

My blessings and love to my daughter Renuka, my younger brother Surrinder and his daughter Tara for typesetting the poems in their personal computers.

Preface

A brief historical background is in order to introduce this work, which is an expression of my experiences of the last violent decade in Kashmir.

Having failed through three major wars to annex the state of Jammu and Kashmir, Pakistan hatched a low intensity proxy war by fuelling insurgency in the state. She cashed on the religious sentiments of its Muslim youth and provided them incentives to cross over to training camps in that country for religious indoctrination and instruction in subversion and guerrilla warfare. During the years 1986-1990 thousands of these trained youth were pushed back in batches as warriors (Mujahids) and equipped with sophisticated arms and lethal ammunition to wage a war of 'liberation' (Jihad) under the command of numerous terrorist outfits remote-controlled in Pakistan. The 'Jihad' started with threats, abduction, torture and killing of the minority Hindus of the Kashmir valley (the Kashmiri Pandits), who were forced to flee. It resulted in the exodus of nearly three hundred and fifty thousand people into the neighbouring province of Jammu and the plains of India in the first half of 1990. Meanwhile, death and destruction continued in the valley, the armed bands burning down educational institutions, bridges and vital communications,

looting, vandalising and burning the leftover properties of Pandits, enforcing Islamic diktat on the masses and holding civil servants to ransom in order to run the administration by proxy.

Soon what was believed to have started as a freedom movement degenerated into a massive operation of loot, extortion and rape. The majority of Kashmiri Pandits having fled, the guns were now turned towards the moderates amongst Muslims and the common village folk. Their initial enthusiasm and support for militancy cooled off as the Mujahids who started as their heroes showed their true colours as they indulged in a relentless spree of plundering forests, looting properties, collecting forced donations from the salaries and earnings of every working person, coercing people to enlist their young boys for training in the camps, and demanding their unwed girls in matrimony. As a vested interest developed in militancy, new power equations evolved and foreign mercenaries were pumped in to fill the vacuum created by the capture, surrender and death of 'local militants' in internecine battles and counter insurgency operations. In spite of some containment of militancy, the militant groups have expanded their field of operations into Jammu with their hit and run tactics of causing bomb blasts in busy bazaars, bus stands and railway stations and the selective killings of Hindus in remote villages, the militants entrenching themselves in inaccessible dense forests.

These poems written during the last ten years.

have been arranged in three sections. The first section unfolds the rise of militancy in Kashmir which was touted as the bastion of Hindu Muslim amity and the epicentre of cultural synthesis (Kashmiriyat) and religious tolerance. The Pandits and their gods are under attack as the Muslim fundamentalists seek to cleanse the valley of 'infidels', creating terror, charge sheeting them for treason, exhorting the masses to revolt and throw them out of their homeland.

The second section describes the exodus and the rootlessness of exile; the hurt, trauma and anguish of an itinerant existence away from home; the haunting memories of the past and the present persecutions; the vulnerability of life and the spectre of death in the refugee camps. Their preoccupation with the search for their roots and their gods and the mental debate as to whether they failed their gods or the gods failed them is an ongoing process of self-appraisal with the Pandits. The crisis of identity on the one hand and the attempts to re-create the lost paradise on the other is part of the unfolding moral, psychological and spiritual struggle that goes on side by side with the struggle for day to day survival in exile.

The third section depicts the urge to reclaim the roots as hope kindles with the reports of containment of terrorism coupled with the conciliatory postures of Muslims in the valley and as visitors from there bring the nostalgia of homeland to the Pandits in exile.

The poem 'Arrival', capturing the images while

on his travels to his exiled relatives in India, is authored by Dr Robin Chowdhury, my brother, living in Australia. I could not resist the urge to include it in my collection here and 'On Your Arrival' is my response to his sentiments.

The poems bear the date (or month) and the place of writing. Because of arrangement in three sections some poems written on an earlier date appear later or vice versa, but the poems in each section follow a chronological order.

K L Chowdhury
Jammu – May 2000

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Section I
The Gathering Storm

The Mists of Siva

The mists dance around you
four seasons through
Lord Siva,
ensconced in your stone temple
on top of the Shankaracharya hill
rechristened Suleiman
by the fervent faithful.

The mists play hide-and-seek
as they alternately cover
and lay bare
mortar, metal, brick and concrete
hauled up to build houses
on the torso of this hill
for ministers and mandarins.

The mists tantalisingly course
where the contours fall apart
as we bore and blast
a spiral road and parking lot
for motor traffic
up to the hill top.

The mists gently glide and slide
as they deftly seek to hide
the ravages of the security guards
littering this sacred hill
with eggshells, empty bottles,

phlegm and excreta,
while they guard you,
Lord Siva.

The mists play the cosmic dance
while they come to mediate
fresh disputes for ownership
of this strip of temple land
as adherents of the other faith
claim to have dug up evidence
of a tomb's existence,
and fears gain currency
of a Mahabharata breaking out
not only in the valley
but also on this small mount.

Srinagar - March 1988

Caged Goddess

We feel let down goddess Zeystha
as our roles reverse
and it is our turn
to protect you
and thwart wanton designs
of idol lifters and iconoclasts
on the prowl in our land.

We build you a cage
and have to make do
with a latticed *darshana*
as the iron bars
criss-cross your visage
in the rising sun's rays.
But that seems to us
a half measure at best,
as the zealots seek other ways
to carry you away,
and we move you to a safer place
of an iron vault in a sealed room
with security on guard!
Yet the fear lurks in our minds
of the guards turning conspirators
and joining hands
with the abductors.

Is there a way out of this distress,
our protectress,
except for you to become un-manifest

and repair to the bosom of this spring,
(from where, aeons back
you didst rise to rule our hearts)
and bide your time to reincarnate
till we settle scores,
in this accursed valley of ours?

Srinagar - April 1988

The Battle Cry of Jihad

Time - autumn of the year 1989
Scene -Precincts of a medical institution in Srinagar, Kashmir.

First speaker:
Fellow medics, students,
doctors, nurses, residents,
technicians and attendants,
ambulance drivers, gatekeepers,
of *Azadi* - all soldiers.
Let us to the mosque,
to the prayer,
the Friday sermon,
hear, hear.
Come hurry, your work can stay,
the patients are not running away,
praise be to Allah,
the all-merciful,
the eternal healer,
Lailahi –illalah!

Second speaker:
Welcome ye faithful,
chosen worshippers,
true believers
of Islam - all soldiers.
Gird up your loins, comrades-in-arms,
unite for the holy *Jihad,*

let us in this domain
usher in God's reign,
the true *Nizame Mustafa,*
Lailahi-illalah!

Third speaker:
Forward brave Mujahid youth,
destroy this evil, forsooth,
take the suffering in its stride,
all sacrifice is but trite
for the noble cause divine,
as much yours as mine.
Success knocks at the door,
else martyrdom
and heaven, for sure.

Fourth speaker:
Cleanse this land once for all
of the usurper, the polluter,
the infidel, the informer,
the *Dale Batta* and *Batten,*
symbols and agents of *Bharat*
that erode our *Kashmiryat.*
Follow them to their working place,
kick them out of your grace,
hound them out of this place,
wipe out their every trace.

Chorus:
KP go back.
Indian dogs go back.
Sikhs and Muslims are brothers,
wherefore all others?

This land is ours.
Islam *Zindabad!*
Pakistan *Zindabad!*
Praise be to Allah,
Lahilaha-illalah!

Srinagar - September 1989

Civil Curfew

They call it the civil curfew,
civilian groups enforcing it
on fellow civilians,
by word of mouth,
a decree from the mosque,
or a diktat through the newspaper,
a day and night curfew
on one pretext or the other...
the Pakistan day today,
that is sought to inspire;
tomorrow, the Indian independence day,
a black day for ever;
and a day to look forward to,
the Kashmir day, the day after!
The martyr's day yesterday,
in memory of the mujahideen;
and the day before, a protest day,
against the police crackdown.
There are the Fridays too-
the Friday before and the Friday after...
The civil curfew keeps repeating
at the behest of militant groups-
the Hizeb-ul-mujahidin today,
the Harkat-ul-ansar tomorrow,
the Hurriyat the day after
and others waiting their turn,
vying with each other.
The hapless citizens see no end,
nor does anyone dare

to call off the curfew,
so the civilians too declare
a curfew against the civil curfew.
Pray when will the curfew clear?

Srinagar - September 1989

The Martyrdom of Pandit Tikkalal

Sir, did you hear,
Tikkalal is dead.
Tikkalal Tapiloo, sir,
the Jan Sangh fellow,
the Pandit leader,
the petty pleader.

Yes sir,
he has been shot
like a dog
right near his house
while on his way
to the law courts.

But why
do you turn pale, sir,
at the death
of one Tikkalal
when day after day
scores of Mujahid youth
are gunned down
in their noble pursuit
for Nizame Mustafa.

You need not panic, sir,
nor fear the revolution,
for it is decreed
that all Pandits will be safe
as long as they pay heed

and do not dare or dream
to work against the 'cause'
but quietly join the mainstream.

Don't you think, sir,
that a good-for-nothing fellow
like that braggart Tapiloo,
had to pay the price,
sooner or later,
for opening his mouth
rather wide.

After all, sir,
he was nothing more
than a self-proclaimed rhetor
of the RSS gospel
and I wonder
if Pandits ever
acknowledge a leader
or honour a pal
least so Tikkalal,
the funny old Tikkalal.

Srinagar - 13 September 1989

19 January 1990

On that fearful night
I happened to be
a thousand kilometres away
from the blitz and bluster,
but when I recall
the distress phone call
of my horror-stricken sister
who let me hear
through her speaker
the cantankerous uproar
from a thousand loudspeakers and more
hoisted atop the mosques
that rent the valley
exhorting the faithful
to come out of their homes
and throng the streets for a *Jihad,*
to drive the infidels out,
banish the Pandit males
and subdue their females,
I plug my ears to shut off the echo
as I still shudder with the reverberations
of that cacophony of religious frenzy
which sent three hundred and fifty thousand
of my faith
marching from their homes
into the Indian plains.

They say, ever since,
the ghosts of that holocaust night

stalk the length and breadth
of my homeland
and the big bang of that mob outcry
still re-echoes
from hill and dale
like a curse.

Execution

Three brazenly blustering youth
stormed into Azad colony
on that grim wintry afternoon
and in a swift operation
two staked out near the door
while the third, brandishing a gun,
forced into the Pandit house
and fished out their only son.

Terror-stricken, the neighbourhood watched
from behind the window blinds
while the helpless family begged and cried
as they shoved him into an automobile
and sped fast through the lanes.
'Routine questioning,' they yelled
as their victim grovelled and struggled.

From what people had heard and seen
of 'routine' interrogation by the mujahideen
we could hardly believe our eyes
when he returned at eventide,
and the whole mohalla – Muslims and Pandits –
kissed and hugged him in felicitation
and showered peanuts, dates and candy
in a traditional demonstration.

'These mujahid youth,' a neighbour claimed,
'go by that strict code of discipline
not to abduct, torture or kill

unless when driven by reason
to haul up an agent or informer
or one suspected of treason.
They are no terrorists indeed
as some make them out to be
or they would not have set him free
and acquitted him honourably.'

But in the dead of the following night
they swooped on the house once again
and the next morning his body was found
side by side with that of a female
with signs of torture and bullet holes
and a note staked into their breasts—
'Beware the wages of sin.'

'It seems the righteous warriors,'
the neighbour was forced to conclude
'must have gathered fresh evidence
of this irreligious alliance
between two persons of different faiths,
and punished them in accordance
with their scrupulous ordinance.'

Srinagar - 10 February 1990

The Hizeb Credo

The Pandit cowards
are known to get incontinent
even at the distant scent
of an adversary or opponent;
why waste your bullets,
why cause needless bloodshed
when hands can be used instead?

We need to spare the guns
for the bigger battles
against the heathens.

Look how the chicken-hearts
vent their spleen
at the very name
Hizeb-ul-mujahideen.

Strangle one
and scare and scatter a dozen.

Srinagar - 14 February 1990

Declaration of Non-allegiance

Be it known
that I and my family
disclaim all allegiance whatsoever
to any political party,
State or Central,
and that we forswear
any link
that we or our ancestors
might have had even remotely ever
with any group or organisation
that works against the revolution.

We further solemnly aver
to distance ourselves for ever
from any adverse political views
and atone for any sins
of misunderstanding, pain or distress
caused by word, deed or conduct
from sheer oversight or ignorance.

We also notify and declare
through the columns of this paper
that we would never dare
even to consider being a member
of any group, subversive or under-cover,
that operates for the enemy
to undermine the cause so dear;
and that we will guide our life
through struggle, strife and care

on the shining trail
blazed by the brave mujahideen
and volunteer to offer
any sacrifice
that falls in our share.

Srinagar - signed by Z and family on 23 February 1990

The Score is Equal

What is the score today?
Four, they say.
Pray, who are they?
Two Mujahideen –
went down fighting
the Indian war machine.
And the other two?
Need you imagine who –
Pandits, it is true,
agents and informers,
brought to justice
by our brave warriors.
The score is equal then?
Yes, two martyrs
against two conspirators.
No Indian dogs?
Come don't dismay,
Inshallah, in heaps tomorrow,
if not today.

Srinagar - March 1989

Witness to a Massacre

There is a cemetery at Omaha beach
near the sea.
There is another
seven thousand feet above
here, under a mountain lea.

At Omaha, near the sea,
lie buried
nine thousand and seven eighty-three,
who fought the war gloriously
laying down their lives
for their country.

Here at Pahalgam
under the mountain lea,
in an undeclared war
there has been a killing spree
of a whole pinewood.
The neatly sawn stumps
of every tree
stand in rows
on their graves underneath
as a mute testimony
to the brutal tyranny
not of Hitler or Mussolini
but of criminals at large
from amongst you and me.

Srinagar - March 1990

Siege of Kralkhod

As the cawing crows darkened the sky
in their flight back home to roost
and the mynahs chirped and squabbled
to settle in the eaves for the night,
somewhere in midtown Srinagar
a shouting horde of near three hundred
descended on ancient Kralkhod.

The slogan-mongering menacing crowd
in *pherons*, mufflers, blankets
skullcaps, helmets, turbans
kangris, lathis and handguns
dashed in different directions
and some more took up positions.

While the Vitasta flowed its meandering course
and the muezzin from the nearby mosque
beckoned the believer to the evening prayer
they rounded up from the neighbourhood
Pandit families that had withstood
the threats to run away for good.

Pushed and herded into a compound
walled with houses all around
and the exit to the entrance lane
blocked by a ramshackle barricade
were a hundred and fifteen souls
male and female; young and old,
shaking with fear, shivering with cold.

They were charged to stand there
in that cramped yard, wet and bare,
and warned of lashing, bashing and death
unless they recited the scripture
and chanted Allah-o-Akbar
till the early morning hour.

Infants tugged at their mothers' breasts,
little kids kicked and cried in terror,
the old and the infirm could barely mutter,
while the others were left with little choice
but to recite loud and clear
for the whole of Kralkhod to hear,
Allah-o-Akbar, Allah-o-Akbar.

The Pandits pitched their voices right
and the chorus progressed into the night
as the sneers of the zealots and their jeers
yielded slowly to cheers and tears
and the militant crowd chose to disperse
leaving behind a few warriors
to see it run to the appointed hour
when the muezzin called the morning prayer.

The chants died down at daybreak
and the released captives limped away
but that was the last we heard of them.
Kralkhod weeps for its inhabitants,
for its centuries-old descendants,
who never returned to their waiting homes
but were forced to become 'migrants'.

Srinagar - 16 March 1990

The Charge Sheet

O, you fugitive Pandit,
you *Batta* migrant,
wandering like a vagrant,
why do you run away,
your motherland to betray,
that waits for deliverance
from cruel Indian governance?

Lured by Jagmohan-
ace infidel, arch villain-
to those plains of dust and sand
and the promised plots of land,
for petty doles, cash and kind,
leaving the tyrannised Muslims behind
canon-fodder to Indian guns,
to be bombed out of existence.

You betrayers of *Azadi,*
chicken hearts and cowards,
flying like frightened birds
to those pigeon holes
spurning all that is dear,
cheating your *Mauj Kasheer.*

Together we had lived and suffered,
together we should have persevered,
and fighting side by side,
accepted death in its stride
for the noble cause divine
that frees us from the Indian swine.

You do not have to care
when we are with you here,
nor get a scare
by a few threatening letters,
phone calls, or warning posters
or when taken away in fetters
for a little interrogation
if only to clear the notion
that you have something to hide
and are not bona fide;
and if your kin get killed,
throttled, drowned, hanged or peeled
for being unholy members
of *CBI, RSS, RAW,*
moles and informers
agent provocateurs.

If you had a clean record
why run away of your own accord
to spread lies about us
besmirching *Azadi* thus.

Mischief-mongers, self-seekers,
deceivers, double-dealers,
with your renewed treachery
you hatch another conspiracy
to carve out a place from our land
you dare call your Homeland?

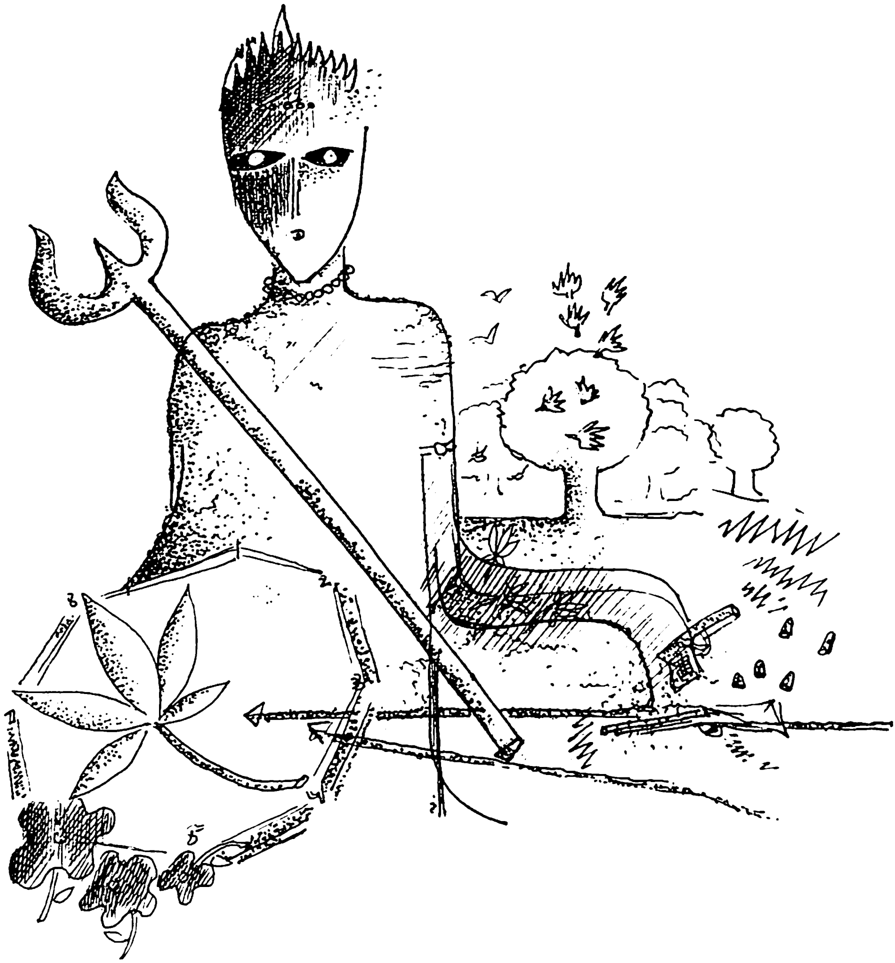
As the revolution reaches every door,
Inshallah in a few months more,
Nizame-Mustafa as of yore
will be here once more.

Srinagar - April 1990

Sieve

How do you suppose
I can record
the impressions
of these violent times
when every bullet
that maims or kills
punches a hole
in my soul
which by now
is like a net
cast in a river in flood
with innocent blood?

Srinagar - April 1990



Plaint to Kheerbhawani

In the company of ancient chinars
that sage-like in meditation stand
and seated in the midst of the Spring,
you reign supreme, Mother Kheerbhawani,
as the river Sindhu sends a stream
to skirt round you in reverential embrace,
and hallows this piece of chosen land
where countless foreheads bend in delight,
of your devotees sanctified.

Little earthen lamps dance around you
in bright sunshine and evening hue,
be it summer or freezing winter,
the chants resound, the hymns pervade,
the conchs sing, the bells ring.

We deck you in flowers of all hues,
of all seasons - reds, whites, and blues -
the hyacinth and the chrysanthemum,
vena, pansy and lotus,
guelder-rose and narcissus,
marigolds, lilies and the rest.

We flock to you day after day,
and every eighth day of the moon,
when you are at your best,
most benevolent and kindest,
we wash your feet with our tears
and bathe you in ambrosia,

sweeten your spring with candy cakes,
and with our most prized apparel,
sweep the floor round the *Octagon,*
as in wonder, awe and admiration
we watch your changing moods,
transforming the colours of the Spring
that symbolise our destiny,
from turquoise to sapphire blue,
Nabadi to emerald green,
amber yellow to rose pink –
heralds of peace, plenty and joy -
and at times the red of war
or the frightful black
that presages death.

But now the clamour, cacophony, and curse
drown the chants, hymns, and verse
as the fanatics rave and rage
and open the barrels of their guns
on your loving daughters and sons.
Why don't you arise and strike
rather than stand there sphinx-like,
why doesn't the Spring turn blood-red
to signal war on the tyrant,
why doesn't it change to pitch-black
and chase evil from its track?

Srinagar - April 1990

Farewell

It was only a matter of time
for me and my family
to leave the town and run away,
but that tell-tale threatening letter
that I was served yesterday
helped me to decide without delay
and fix tomorrow, the first of May,
as the departing day.

Left with a single day,
we ask each other,
is there a better way
than to spend it together,
this warm spring day,
in our garden here,
as a mark of farewell?

As we sit and stroll
and admire and extol
the lineage of each plant and tree
how spontaneously
each member of the family
picks up one implement or the other
and sets to work furiously.

We mow the lawn,
trim the bushes,
turn the soil in the flower-beds,
water the pansies and the phlox,

fondle the flowers and the buds,
spruce and sweep
and strew the fertiliser,
here, there, and everywhere.

Is this flurry of activity,
this spontaneity in the family,
the last rite of a sacred duty;
or is it because we all feel guilty
that we are leaving behind a legacy,
a larger part of ourselves,
this garden family,
to the terrorists' mercy;
or is it to escape from the reality
of the pain of exodus and turbulence
which we all experience;
or is it out of a sanguine hope
that this love's labour and toil
will never be futile
but stay with us a fond memory
of our bonds to this soil;
or is it the faith in our tenacity
that each time we faced the exodus,
five times in our history,
we staged an honourable re-entry?

Srinagar - 30 April 1990

Section II
Exodus and Exile

A Hundred Kilometre Tunnel of Fear

First of May, nineteen ninety,
we sneak out of home
in the blanket of night,
we drive, huddled together-
the whole family,
idols and icons,
images and framed photographs
of deities and ancestors,
some prized letters, books and clothes
and a clod of mother earth-
cutting through the valley
along a hundred kilometre tunnel of fear.

We drive,
breaths suspended,
lips sealed,
ears cocked,
hands on our breasts,
trying to muffle our hearts
that flutter in unison
with the pistons of the engine;
our telescoped gaze
shutting off the chasing phantoms
and focussed straight ahead
without once looking back
till we cross the Banihal pass,
as the dawn breaks
into light,

into freedom,
into life.

Banihal, Kashmir - 1 May 1990

Lamentation

Seated aloft the hill
how lonely you feel,
Lord Shankara,
while your hapless devotees,
victims of the word, the sword and the gun,
flee in terror
yet once again.

How dry and parched you must be
as there is none to massage thee
with sandalwood and *ghee,*
wash you in potfuls
of milk and rosewater
and weave petal patterns
on your body.

There is not a sound
of the chants that would resound
of your votaries going round,
and an eerie silence reigns
where hymns once regaled,
the bells chimed,
the conchs hailed.

The breeze no longer wafts the incense
nor do a hundred flames leap in cosmic dance,
O, where is the touch of faithful foreheads,
of passionate hands that caressed thee!

The air is heavy, still and sultry,
the sky a dull dreary haze,
O, where is the lingering mist
that your feet did kiss,
where the cool breeze
that fanned your brow,
where the myriad clouds
that sailed in salute
in the deep blue vault above!

The heart cries in pain
as I seek you here in vain
in this hot desert plain.
The Aravelli is a poor consolation
and remote from the Himalayas,
the thistle, thornbush, and the wild vine
a pitiful imitation
of the chinar and the pine.

Try as hard as I may
to sculpt you in stone and clay,
the *lingam* slips further
from my clumsy grasp
and all my muse and meditation
is of no avail
to bring you anywhere
within my mind's pale.

All that we treasure now
is a vision of the past
as the future, dim and dismal,
is getting irretrievably lost
while the present
is a plaint deep within
struggling to reach your distant ears

and a picture of pathos
which has failed to bestir you
to open your Third Eye,
a call of distress
from your deserted devotees
cast in the tempest of Time.

Delhi - 10 June 1990

The Burning Pyre

Since the Pandits arrived
there have been long queues
waiting for their turn
to go up to the pyre.
Young and old,
male and female,
robust and frail,
they are here without fail
and the fire
in the funeral pyre
has hardly ceased
this whole year.

The bodies keep waiting
not that there is a dearth here
of shroud or firewood,
but a family priest
for the final rites
is so hard to get,
and at other times
the corpses have to bide
a whole day
for the final adieu
from their kith and kin,
scattered as they are,
arriving by bus and train,
from near and far.

Wonder why
there is this rush
to go on the pyre?
Besides other things
it does appear
that it is the heat
they cannot bear,
and the sun here
has burnt them up
much before
the fire on the pyre.

Jammu - September 1990

Identity

I left behind my identity
when I was forced to flee
and I need to prove my pedigree
while I am here
as a refugee.

I possess neither the ration card
nor my school diploma
nor the state subject certificate
nor the voters list-
my own, or of my family.

My status is under question,
my identity suspect,
for I am unable to adduce
any documents or evidence
or proof that I and my ancestors
have lived in my motherland
for five thousand years.

There are three hundred and fifty thousand here
who could vouch for me
but their testimony is null and void
for they, like me,
roam without identity.

Who am I,
oft do I ask myself,

and others too,
but a reply
is hard to come by.

Jammu - December 1990

To Kashmir

Many are your daughters and sons
who patiently sit
through this wintry wilderness,
awaiting the end of the long night.
Elsewhere, their kin wander, homeless,
in many cities and towns
waiting to be let back into the paradise.
Some trickle out of the shadows
to the freedom beyond,
bearing tales of your wounds
and the muffled whisper of conspirators.
The wails of the victims of the gun
are a part of your profound sorrow,
the silence of the majority
your undying shame.

There may yet be hope
in the forbearance of your singed forests,
the tranquillity of your soiled streams,
and the loftiness of your weeping mountains –
mute witness to your tragedy.

Jammu - January 1991

Twin Shame

They tore me
from the lap of my motherland,
threw me out of my home,
usurped my estate
and forced me into exile,
because I belonged
to a faith different from theirs.
Now perchance when they meet me
I cannot fathom why,
much as I would like to greet them
like in the days gone by,
neither can I accost them
nor look them straight in the eye.
I melt with the twin shame
of the victim
who failed to defend himself
and of the tormentors
who felt no remorse
at the betrayal of the trust
that was reposed in them.

Jammu - 1 March 1991

Dried Offerings

A middle-aged woman keeps eyeing
the bougainvillaea in my lawn
as she passes along the walkway
on her way to the temple,
every day.

She lingers for a moment, one day,
her eyes alight at the exuberance
and she attempts to pick some flowers
but fails to reach the wall
from where they overhang in gay abandon.
She pauses, peeps and opens the gate,
furtively advances towards the luxuriant bush
and plucks them tenderly, one by one.

She is hardly done
when she catches me spying
from inside the house.
She falters, her colour fades,
the flowers fall from her hand
and blow with the morning breeze.

I come out of the house
and smile a nod of assurance
as she fumbles for words,
'All my life I offered flowers,
fresh, fragrant and brimful,
but now exiled and pauperised

I tried to steal them like a thief
to please my angry God.
How can he ever forgive me
this transgression, this sin?'
'Like you, I am an exile,
a tenant in this house,
and these flowers a gift of god,
as much mine as yours.
Take as many as you please,
God cannot get angry
with his own devotee
who has not lost faith in him
even in such adversity.'

She quickly gathers
the flowers scattered on the ground
and fumbles in her apron pouch
for a small bundle
which she tenderly unties
for me to see.
'This is all I carried with me
when in a fearful hurry
we were forced to flee.
I offer with all humility
this humble token
of whatever worth it may be.
Take it, it will please me.'

I gather in my hands
her touching gift of love-
dried rose petals, greyish white,
picked nearly a year before
that one could hardly tell

but for the sweet tinge of nostalgia
and devotion so strong
that perchance may please my lord
as I adorn him with this prized offering.

Jammu - 16 April 1991

Dole

Here a 'migrant' stands in a queue
in this blazing afternoon sun
for his monthly allocation-
three hundred and seventy five rupees,
a kilo of sugar, two of wheat,
ten and a half of stale rice,
and a litre of kerosene.

He has gone through fire and hell
to establish his credential
as a bona fide refugee
from the terror-smitten valley,
and every quarter or half yearly
he is directed to produce
evidence and fresh documentation-
affidavits, recent photographs-
to back up his identification.
Yet, invariably,
he has to part with
a chunk of his relief and ration
as a little gratification
to the greedy officials
in charge of the distribution.

And yonder in that prison
is detained a terrorist,
euphemistically called a militant,
who receives four fifty a month;
milk, mutton and eggs to boot

his daily share of cereal;
menus of his taste to suit;
and an unlimited supply of water;
playground and a prayer-hall,
toiletry, and laundry-
overseen and monitored regularly
by human rights groups
and many a visiting dignitary
from the country and abroad.
And to boost the prisoner's morale
are the many directives from the court
to the administration and the jail
to uphold the mandatory standard
for his convenience and comfort.

Asks his victim, the 'migrant',
'Why don't I turn a militant,
pick up a gun and surrender,
if only for a better deal
for food, amenities and shelter?
The prison at Kote is a safer haven
than the dungeon at Muthi,
more promise in being a militant
than a wretched refugee.'

Jammu - July 1991

Camp School

In the wild outskirts of the city,
on a barren piece of land at Muthi,
five tattered tents each twelve feet by twenty,
flapping in the wind, holding tenuously,
make our school for a hundred and thirty.

The only furniture or upholstery
is a bare blackboard, solitary,
rough and ridged and rickety,
that refuses to be writ upon
with any chalk, coloured or white,
hard, soft or powdery.

The 'migrant' teachers try their best
with words, gestures and pantomime
but often leave the class in disgust
as the wind blows hot, the sun peeps through
or the rains seep in to flood the school
and the skin smarts and burns with the 'loo'.

But that doesn't dampen our spirits
in this veritable laboratory
where the briar and bush is our botany,
the insects and worms our zoology,
the sand and stones our geology,
the elements our physics and chemistry,
mother nature our library
and we ourselves the history.

Ours is not just a camp school,
but a mini open university.

Jammu - 15 August 1991

The First Right to Forcible Seizure

I am a refugee from Kashmir,
having been forced to abdicate
and take flight.

No sooner had I left
than my house was plundered,
my kindly neighbour informs.
Disembowelled one by one
of all its contents-
furniture, fittings, fixtures-
right under his nose.
'They would kill me
if I intervened,'
he explains.

Mr. X from somewhere downtown
has moved into my house,
removed my nameplate from the door
and affixed his own,
so says my good neighbour.
He can stand it no more,
he is biting his nails,
tearing his innocent heart out,
as he now repents for having demurred
and not being the first to occupy my house.

To be fair to the good Samaritan
he never had an eye on my house
but having shared a common boundary,
he argues,

hadn't he the right,
the first right,
to the forcible seizure of my house?

Jammu - 26 December 1991

Testimony

Who will bear testimony
to my identity
when the bits and pieces of evidence-
the ration card and the municipal certificate,
the passport and the driving license,
the revenue records and the land papers-
have all been inundated
in the flood of violence,
and human evidence
either unavailable or inadmissible,
unless it were possible
for my abandoned house
where I lived and loved and dreamt,
or the lonely chinar nearby
that often its breeze lent,
or the lovelorn birds
that of a morning flew in for the grain,
or the sulking dog
that never barked in vain,
or the deserted lanes
that I traversed every day,
or the temple in ruin
where I would worship and pray –
one or all of them-
to speak up one day
and vouchsafe to the identity
of a Kashmiri Pandit?

Jammu - 24 May 1992

A Space to Die

'Your father is sinking day by day.
Why don't you change your doctor, say?
The refugee medics will take their time
to grasp the afflictions of this clime.
A *phanda* may help, or a *mantra*
till you seek out Dr Gandotra.'

I had no choice but soon to call
the celebrated physician before nightfall
but father grew from bad to worse,
enfeebled, stuporous unable to nurse.

'If all the measures fail to revive,
your patient may not long survive.
In view of his critical state
you better move before it is too late.
I can allow a few days grace
till you find another place,
but no mishaps here in my residence,
no mourning, no impertinence.'

I rushed back to my own doctor
as the condition deteriorated from hour to hour.
'Pray prolong his life a few days
till I shift to an alternate place.
Some shots, some freak remedies,
a little breather, a slender lease.'

Off I went from door to door
to rent a space just five by four,
where father may rest in peace awhile
ere *Yama* takes him from exile,
to where he wishes for ever to lie
in his native place, so glad to die.

Jammu - June 1992

Drought

While elsewhere in the city
water tanks overflow callously
and the life-fluid goes down the drain
the refugee camps at Muthi
face a scarcity.
In spite of incessant rains
their taps run dry
for the fifth successive day
while their dear departed
wait patiently
for oblations of water,
this being the *Pitra Paksha,*
the moonless *Ashvin* fortnight,
so sacred to their memory.

The dead will have to persevere
and go thirsty for now
and wait until the next year
for the *shradda* ceremony
as there is not even a drop
for the living here.

Jammu - 1 September 1992

Lovesick

Like the parched earth
in the summer of Indian plains
waiting for the first shower of rains
we look forward to your arrival
and count on every moment
of your company
here with us in our exile.
Your mother
rails at the suggestion
that some sick or needy
may seek your consultation,
and she would not let go
even a minute of your proximity,
for like a devotee
she likes to have her god
to herself completely.
There cannot be, in her view,
anybody more sick or needy,
if you understand
what lovesickness in exile means,
when there is nothing else
to fall back upon.

Jammu - January 1993

Ode to an Amaltas

You showered blossoms each day.
Like rain they poured down my way-
soft petals, gossamer gay-
that I patiently swept away,
lest the devotees, when they come to pray,
tread, trample and scatter away,
this sacred floral tribute you pay
to my lord, night and day.

Fresh flowers rained down every day
in yellow grandeur all the way,
again did I sweep them away
and a third time each passing day,
as you poured your heart away
in pure devotion day by day.

'Stop awhile if you may,
my cup is full', I prayed one day
and this prayer of mine, curse nay,
so readily back did you repay
as the blossoms thinned each day,
the flowers finally vanished away,
the leaves fell down and faded away,
the sparrow, dove and the jay
one by one flew away
and by the following month of May
the body slowly went to decay.

The devotees were scared away,
'the curse, the curse,' they were heard to say,
'who brought it on? Let us chase him away,
blasphemer, religious-runaway.'
Should I open my bosom and betray
my petition to the lord that fateful day
that I was slowly wasting away
sweeping the blossoms night and day?
Or should I believe what some others say
as the details are given away
of that ominous day in May
when in foolish fervour, if I may,
the devotees had a field day
as cement, concrete and marble-inlay
filled where they dug away
the soft, warm and fertile clay
that held your roots, O! Amaltas gay.

A corpse now stands in the way
where your majesty once held sway
and poured fresh petals each day
on pilgrims coming all the way
to the lord, their homage to pay.

Jammu - 1 May 1993

Saga of the Student

A bus skids off the road,
hurtles twenty feet down a gorge,
bang into a boulder.
Three instant deaths,
four fractured skulls,
five flail chests,
a score broken bones,
bruises, gashes galore.

Who are the victims?
Worn out and wasted,
battered and bedevilled,
depressed and distressed,
they are the Pandit students,
Brahmin boys treated as pariahs,
refugees in their own land.

Snatched from the bosom of their motherland,
forced into exile in their teens,
they grow up in tents and tenements.
Segregated into 'camp' schools,
few graduate to college level
while most drop out
as heartless mandarins of education,
remote-controlling their destiny,
deliberately harass and procrastinate
admissions, examinations, and results,
as three years of curriculum
drag on to six or seven,

while graduation fades into a distant dream.

Desperation drives the helpless youth,
in search of their rights,
from schools to secretaries to satraps,
from classrooms to courts,
street rallies to hunger strikes
to face batons, handcuffs and jails,
as every other method fails.

This is the tragic saga
of innocent boys and girls,
victims of a conspiracy
where the militant and the bureaucrat,
the police, politician and the prosecutor,
have ganged up against them,
and not to be left behind
accidents readily join the grind.

Jammu - March 1994

Arda Shankara

Up the Roop Nagar hill
there resides Arda Shankara
in an open temple,
a half *lingam*
of grey golden-brown stone
basking under the open sky,
away from the hue and cry.

A Gujjar nomad, they say,
in his heyday
of idol breaking frenzy
axed the *lingam,*
and from its bosom, as it split
into two unequal halves,
flowed a torrent of blood.
The bigger half
is our Arda Shankara atop the hill.

Nobody knows for certain
about the other half.
The *Gujjar* rustic, there is a belief,
carried it along and came to grief.

The Arda Shankara
that reigns from this hill
to bless his people
is not a common idol
of splintered stone
nor a mere half-god,

nor a maimed lord,
but matchless in his grace
divine, with a human face.

Unwittingly the iconoclast
seized by fanatic rage
sculptured a beautiful lord,
the unique Arda Shankara,
whom we worship
for his wholesome benevolence,
and not out of vengeance,
because an ignorant mortal
raised his axe.

Jammu - 16 September 1994

Funeral of a Monkey

'*Ram Nam Sat Hai*, resounds in the air,
the procession moving through the streets-
a pier adorned with buntings and saffron flags
carrying the mortal remains
of a monkey.

The pallbearers take slow measured steps,
a dozen urchins in the vanguard
dance in frenzy
to the tune of a tragic film song,
the more venerable form the rear,
and others beating drums, tolling bells,
as the crowd jostles and swells
toward the pyre,
each one eager
to lend a helping shoulder.

'*Ram Nam Sat Hai,*'
the solemn refrain rises above the din
as the procession takes a turn
toward the *Hanuman* temple
for the blessings of the monkey god.

Not far from the temple,
on the wayside,
lies an abandoned corpse
half shrouded in dirty white,
mourned by a moth-eaten dog;
a flock of ravens in their black apparel

and a swarm of buzzing flies
complete the funeral crowd;
this being the death
of an unknown mortal,
not that of a monkey,
the incarnation of *Hanuman*
but of man,
the offspring of Mammon.

Lucknow - 10 January 1995

Devotion Gone Overboard

In this pilgrim city
there is a unique celebrity,
an ancient peepul tree
chosen for worship
by many a devotee.

In a deed of devotion,
a sweeping show of piety,
and possibly in memory
of spouses and sons,
the zealous ones
flagged the earth around the tree
with grey and white marble stones.

Easy in their tread
they circumambulate the tree
on this shining marble stone,
which, unknown to them,
slowly strangulates,
snuffs the air out of its roots,
saps it dry
and starves it of sustenance.

Curious pilgrims throng
in ever-increasing numbers
and marvel how long
budless, leafless and sterile
the tree stands
as the bark peels off,

the brittle twigs break
and fungus and moss overtake.
But that does not slacken
their adoration nor fervour
as they adorn the tree
with iron bells and light bulbs
that hang from its enfeebled limbs,
and make use of the hollows
for their banners and flags,
and on the sagging shoulders
mount a loudspeaker
to beckon the faithful
and the believer.

Their devotion unflagging
they anoint the trunk daily
with *sindhoor,* saffron and sandalwood,
burn incense and sticks of resin,
and chanting with passion
move earthen lamps in a sinuous motion
and wash and mop with ardour
this marble stone around the tree.

This revered peepul has to hold on
and stand as long as it can
as they embellish it
with wish-knots
of many-hued threads.
It dare not let them down
and their faith disown.

Jammu - 20 February 1995

Invocation

O! Teg Bahadur,
preceptor, guru, guide,
saviour of our ancestors,
we offer our obeisance
in everlasting gratitude
for your deed sublime.

Even angels are jealous
of your sacrifice supreme,
not for your own kin or community
nor region nor religion
but for a tyrannised people
of faraway climes
who sought your help.

O compassionate one,
true crusader of rights,
in an unprecedented act of courage
you laid down your life to salvage
our oppressed ancestors
from persecution and conversion,
from flight and extinction.

O immortal soul,
worship-worthy Teg,
we crave your reincarnation
as Aurangzeb surfaces yet again
in so many forms, at so many places
in our sacred land
with appetite whetted evermore

by the blood of Tapiloo, Premi, Prana
Ganjoo, Lassa Kaul, Raina
and hundreds of innocent souls.

O blessed spirit
reverend guru,
we seek your intercession once again,
for deliverance
from the deadly triumvirate
of armed insurgents,
scheming bureaucrats and
conniving politicians-
perpetrators of crimes
against our race.

Jammu - March 1995

Kashmir – Lust for Savagery

Mere threats are but a thing of the past
calumny, abuse something to last
physical assault a mere routine
loot and arson a common sport
kidnapping a happy pastime
extortion and rape a staple diet
pistols and guns an inane sight
plain murder a tame dish
RDX and bombs something to relish.

The eyes seek a gory scene
more tantalising, never before seen
of bodies hacked, sawed, nailed
eyes gouged out, ears sliced
tongues chopped off, noses levelled
joints twisted, ligaments torn
bones crushed to rubble and sand
hair wrenched from its roots
skin pinched, burnt, peeled
throats slashed, heads severed
bellies ripped open, genitals snipped
the viscera thrown to hungry dogs
and the remains urinated and spat upon
to put to shame beast and demon.

The heart craves more violent death
many a death for every breath
a bomb blast in a busy bazaar
bodies blown to bits and shreds

limbs, torsos, faces and heads
raining down from the sky
here, there, low and high
blood flowing down the drains
and nothing human that remains.

Jammu - September 1995

Paush Amavasya Night

There is nothing as serene and quiet
as the *Paush Amavasya* night
while on your climb
to your rendezvous
with the lord up the hill.

On this cloudless, faultless night
the stars lean low
to touch your brow
as they come out in formations,
galaxies, clusters, constellations,
the whole treasure trove,
vying with each other
to make a reverential bow.

The hills around you, one and all,
in trance-like embrace rise and fall,
the bushes dissolve in the hush of night,
the last of the birds flits home to roost,
and angels lead you by the hand
on your onward upward march.

Wrongly has the *Arnavasya* night
been dreaded and decried
and unfair allusions made
to this fifteenth night
of the moonless fortnight
with ungainliness and fright
when it stands out to epitomise

the supreme lunar sacrifice
as she obliterates herself
so the stars may shine
their brightest and the best
on this cosmic tryst.

And it is not without reason
that the legendary *Yaksha*
chooses *Paush Arnavasya* night
for his yearly earthly trip
to feast on a dinner
of rice, radish and raw fish
in the tranquil starlight,
and offer you a chance bright
to snatch his cap if you might
and secure it under a millstone,
for then and then alone,
and for as long as it remains there,
fortune will smile on its heir.

Only the Paush Amavasya night
offers this opportunity bright
to transform a dark night
into a beneficent sight,
only the *Paush Amavasya* night.

Jammu - December 1995

Frankenstein Monster

Why don't you let me be
and leave me to my fate,
why follow me
here in exile,
my ex-mate?

During the peak of exodus
when I was on the run
you came to me
and lackadaisically
advised me to stay on
but added that you yourself
were so afraid of the gun
and hardly in a position
to stop the killers
nor anyone.

While you adopted this ruse
rather nonchalantly,
I was given to understand
that you had joined,
albeit clandestinely,
those forces let loose
and arraigned against me.

Having thus contrived and
forced me to flee
you also fuelled a rumour
in the manner of a busy bee

that I had renounced everything
and so had thousands of others,
in a mass hysteria of wanderlust,
wilfully forsaken the paradise-
our brothers, sisters and others-
our homes, hearths and habitation
of five thousand years!

Alas! to your horror
now when you find
yourself in a terrible bind
as your own kith and kin
set upon you colour-blind,
it does seem my foreboding
today rings loud and true
that the monster you helped create
one day verily would consume you.

Now you follow me in exile,
and appease your curiosity awhile,
to look at my barren state,
compare your fate with mine,
to share with me a moment
and possibly give free vent
to your choked sentiment
in the freedom of this refugee tent.

I beseech you, my friend,
either let me be
or speak of anything to me
except about the madness
that made me flee.

Jammu - December 1995

Journey Into the Land of the Exiled

Arrival-1
Here I am now
on this last reluctant stage
of my journey of love.
For long have I stayed
away from here,
as destruction raged,
dealt deathly blows
to community and pride.
Dignity and trust
suffered a thousand cuts.
Disgust and distaste filled us;
fear and vacillation
held complete sway.

Has the primeval beast
of ignorance and folly
paused in its rampage?
Will desecration cease?
As I arrive with hope,
and with your beckoning
what will I see around me here?
I ponder this awhile
as I wait for you now.

Arrival-2
Vainly I look
for faces, shapes and spaces,
anything that will unlock

joys of yesteryears
or just the memories.
Humble dwellings which
light with the laughter
of childrens games;
sounds and songs of Spring;
chinars' summer shelter,
Autumn's colours;
the crunching of leaves;
winter welcomed
with snow fights and snowmen,
as *kahva* and *kangris* keep us warm.
But there is only a silence
vast and widespread,
profound sadness permeates all
as I wait for you now.

Arrival-3
I see no folk around,
neighbours nor kinsmen,
traders nor artisans.
Gone are the narrow winding lanes
where children loved to play truant;
silent are the playing fields
where sprains were sustained
in contests and matches
from 'kabaddi' to cricket.

What is this sterile stillness
surrounding these damaged dwellings?
Weeds overtaking this vast wilderness.
The city is fractured and 'free'
as I wait for you now.

Arrival-4
I wait for you now
amidst these ruins
of a once beautiful land,
hallowed over centuries,
graced by saints and Sufis.
Where can I find them
to solicit and seek
their blessings again?

Am I too late?
Or, with all landmarks gone,
have I lost my way?
Have I come to a different land?
Who will come and find me
before it is too late?
I can't stand this silence;
this moonscape frightens me.
To keep despair at bay
I remember meanwhile
those recent stages
of this graduated journey.
Brief, loveable sojourns,
in other cities
amongst the young and the old.
In houses and bazaars
I tasted once more
the joys of welcome,
and loving farewell,
listened to stories of struggles,
of survival in sorrow,
deprivation and desolation,
the meetings with the 'migrants,'
exiles in their own land,
charming characters,

sharing freely forever
their lives and their loves.
Their smiling faces sustain me
as I wait for you now.

Australia - January, 1996

On Your Arrival

Ever since you wrote
about your intended visit
we prayed and hoped
it would come off well.
We waited with bated breath,
drank often and drank deep
the dreams of reunion,
now that it was to be
away from home, in exile.
We scoured places to visit,
surveyed walking trails,
discussed menus to suit your taste,
mowed the lawn,
trimmed the bushes,
planted new saplings
and cajoled them to flower in time
to welcome you
after six long years.

Six years
of the acme of our life,
spent in the anguish of exile,
over half a decade
of rootlessness,
of hatred and intolerance,
of bloodletting and mindless violence,
of people tortured and killed,
and a whole community banished,
of kith and kin

dying before time
of disease and damnation.

And when you did arrive
we suppressed our sighs
and snuffed our cries,
brushed our agonies aside,
lest they pollute the joy
you carried on your wings.
We wore smiles wide
and would not permit
even a shadow of the pain
to flit between us
lest it blemish the bliss of reunion.
We would not let you carry
the burden of those images
back with you.

Jammu - January 1996

Status Change

My friend and neighbour of yore
comes to me here in exile
and exhorts me
to visit my abode erstwhile,
whatever little of it
has withstood
the militants' depredations.

He invites me
to stay in his house
where from I can look
at my battered home
and take stock
of the prevailing state
of my homeland
and, in the bargain,
make a pilgrimage to the temple
on top of the Shankaracharya hill.

He well remembers
that in days gone by
before exile was forced on me
I would climb the hill every morning
to pay salutations to my lord.

The greatest tragedy of exile,
it dawns on me now,
is that the deity within my daily reach

has receded into a remote pilgrimage,
my own house become a relic of the past,
my homeland an alien place,
and my status of a tourist at best.

Jammu - June 1996

Promises

Oft I hear loud promises
that return to the homeland
with honour and dignity
is but a matter of days;
that my house would be rebuilt,
my annexed lands reclaimed and restored,
my status in my job retained,
the temples of my gods consecrated again,
and whatever losses compensated.

While promises go on piling up
and not one gets fulfilled
I wonder
who will reverse
the clock of seven years
and restore lost childhoods,
recover youth that slipped
into middle age,
bring dear ones,
who died prematurely
of distress and distraction, back to life;
make up for lost years of homage
to the deities out there,
and catch up with time
that cannot wait for my return.

Jammu - September 1996

P. S. O

I am a P. S. O.
A personal security officer.
An officer on paper,
but in practice
a vassal of the one
that I secure.

I have to be vigilant
night and day,
and move at his whim,
follow him like a shadow
from his house into the car,
office or bazaar,
mosque or a walking trail,
public function
or a recreational locale.

He flaunts me
shamelessly
as a status symbol,
while I sniff around
like a highbred hound
and keep in readiness
to throw myself in
and safeguard my charge
from abuse and assault.

We P. S. Os
are a fast growing breed

since the terrorists' creed
engulfed my country,
and every minister and secretary
or an official of any consequence
seeks to fortify his security
with a large posse of police
and us.
But not uncommonly,
my charge happens to be
the very fountainhead of militancy
who, having had his fill
of loot and kill,
has abdicated finally
and surrendered to the army.
Not only has he been absolved
of all crimes of insurgency
but also accorded the status
of having formally joined
the socio-political mainstream!
His ex-mates and collaborators
now charge him and upbraid
for being a dangerous renegade
and seek ways and means
to avenge his treachery.
And that is where I come in handy
to insulate him
from his own cult,
and from all fear
from himself,
and from those whom he used to hold
so very near and dear.

Jammu - September 1996

Dyed in the Same Colour

We are being told
that terrorism is on the wane
and that most local 'boys'
have surrendered or been killed
and that all that is left
are the foreign mercenaries.

Frankly I never could tell
one from the other
for they all look alike
in their battle -dress swagger,
rough and tough and gruff,
bearing beards, guns and grenades.
And they all act alike,
be they our own Kashmiris,
Pakis, Arabs, Sudanese
or the battle-hardened Afghanis.

Even in death
when they get killed
in encounters or accidents
or in internecine wars
and are shown lined up like sausages
for the TV news-cast
or in the daily newspapers,
they all look alike-
dyed in the same colour
of their own blood

and the blood
of their innocent victims.

Jammu - September 1996

26 January 1997

You amaze me, my country
that not only you grant immunity
to a dreaded *Ghazi*
who spawned the insurgency,
conspired and took up arms against you,
looted, burned and raped
and gunned down innocent denizens,
with impunity-
but also accord him the privilege
and the highest honour
to take the salute today,
in the Republic Day parade
right in this borough here,
so near to where
his victims shiver
in the refugee tents.

Jammu - 26 January 1997

Sangrampora

O secluded Sangrampora
the sight of seven bodies
of your seven proud sons
shrouded in white
stands as a scathing testimony
to the sacrilege
against all that is human
and a severe indictment
of the savagery let loose
by senseless people
who shame mankind
and aim to smother sane voice
and sweep away
all traces of civilisation
from our sacred land;
for your brave sons chose to hold on,
vainly though, now it seems,
to their roots,
in the face of a violent hurricane
of religious frenzy
to keep alive the heritage
of five thousand years
in the valley.

Jammu - 25 March 1997

The Religion of Killers

At Sangrampora
they picked seven sleeping men
from their homes
in the stealth of night,
seven Pandits
seventeen to seventy
from five families,
gleefully shot them dead
out in the open
before they fled.

They spared the females
and the children,
spared their lives
for the small price
of being widowed
and orphaned!

Who dares say now
that the militants
wielding the gun
don't have a religion?

Jammu - 27 March 1997

The Colour of Blood

Why this weeping and wailing
and beating of chests,
mass rallies and protests,
just because seven Pandits
of remote Sangrampora
were done to death?
Haven't Muslims too
been maimed and killed,
why then does nobody mourn them?
Is their blood white,
is it cheap,
is it trite?

I have no answer
why nowadays
they do not mourn their dead
in the valley accursed,
nor why,
if they took to violence
and chose to kill
people of my faith,
they, as well,
turned their guns
on their own
daughters and sons.
But I know that their blood,
which thirsts for more blood,
cannot but be hot and red,
and surely not cheap

if it buys them martyrdom in a heap.
But I grieve and cry
as bitterly for them
as for the seven
and many others
whose precious lives
were snuffed out
in a betrayal
without parallel.

After all
while I am a victim
of their violent design
they themselves
are their own victims,
such alas!
being destiny's wild whims.

Jammu - 10 April 1997

Premium on Death

My visiting friend from the valley
tells me that people over there
are in a hurry
to meet their doom
for there is a premium on death.

Each of its victims,
whether in crossfire
or in custody,
or through terrorist killings,
leaves behind a legacy
of one hundred thousand in cash,
a job for the next of kin,
a life-time pension for the widow,
and for the orphans
a maintenance allowance
till they come of age.

My friend says
that the stakes for death
have been further raised
for the policemen
that die in action,
from one to five hundred thousand
and there is always
that additional bonus
of another hundred thousand
from the Central Government
as an ex-gratia relief!

There is a vested interest
in death these days
in my lost paradise,
so my friend says.

Jammu - 18 October 1997

Death Threat

He has a death threat
(confessed an old one)
from a Mujahid youth
(his own son)
trigger-happy
and armed with a gun
who swore one day
to shoot him down
not only because he was old
and therefore of no use
to him or anyone,
and for his views
on the cult of the gun-
(so repugnant to the son),
but more on account
of the fair compensation
which violent death nowadays
brings to the next of kin.

Jammu - November 1997

Wandhama

Sangrampora, ten months back,
was a mere rehearsal, a consolation,
but here in Wandhama
it is total extermination-
not just seven males
but without discrimination
of age, sex or position,
the whole Pandit population
and their gods without exception.

Could there have been
a more austere occasion
than the devotional *Shabe-qadar* night
when the whole Muslim population
was out in the mosques
for a night-long prayer and recitation
while their Pandit neighbours
joined the Muslim incantation
with their death throes and supplication
as lethal ammunition was being pumped
into their frames and formation,
right under the nose of the administration?

No orphans this time, no heirs,
no widows no widowers,
no gods nor their worshippers;
twenty-three victims, without survivors,
crying to the Indian nation
on this foggy morning

of the 48th Republic Day celebration
for their final rites and cremation.

All that remains of the Pandits
is a dark cloud in the Wandhama sky
hovering like a huge question mark:
what was that terrible compulsion
that drove the fanatics
to pump eighteen bullets
into the tender constitution
of a tiny kid
that had just begun its locomotion
when a single would have done?

Jammu - 26 January 1998

Exile

Exile is like being shipwrecked,
torn from your roots,
shorn of your identity,
thrown into destinations unknown.

Exile is a leveller.
It has no place for position,
pedigree, power or pelf.
It humbles all.

Exile is an existential crisis,
a crisis of faith, of values,
a challenge to human spirit
that may submerge and sink
to the nethermost depths
or soar to new heights
in the rekindling
of the urge to survive.

Exile is a penance,
a cleansing process of the soul,
a seeking of new vistas,
new values, new relationships,
a new purpose in life.

Exile is like being on a railway platform
waiting for the train
that takes you back to your roots,
a journey of self-rediscovery

drawing you inevitably
to your past,
your identity,
your gods,
your motherland.

Jammu - February 1998

Need for an Identity

As the world moves
into the golden age
of what we call the global village,
and national boundaries
slowly disappear
to merge into a new order
of a single government,
a world democracy,
isn't it anachronistic,
this assertion of my identity?

A Kashmiri Pandit now in exile
but labelled a migrant
for having been uprooted,
why do I stake my claim
as an internally displaced
or a refugee
in my own country?
Why seek a minority status
as a minority Hindu
in a Muslim majority state
of a Hindu majority India?

A jigsaw puzzle, I agree,
the legacy of a race memory,
a generational déjà vu
of persecution and violation,
an ongoing trauma of six centuries,
a sacred injunction

of exodus -stricken ancestors
for redemption,
for salvation.

Yes I will need my identity
so long as these walls
between caste and community,
between faiths and religions,
between races and nations,
are not pulled down completely,
and a true world order
defined in all sincerity.

Jammu - March 1998

Section III
The Call of Roots

Sanctum Sanctorum

Let them break me
into a million bits,
these fanatic nitwits,
I will rise,
from each bit
a whole again;
each pebble, stone or shell
that you pick
from the foothill
or the bed of yonder stream
and install on a pedestal
with unflinching faith,
shall transform into a shrine,
where I shall materialise;
for I am that
which none can abduct,
nor defile, nor destroy.

The zealot and the iconoclast
may have a long reach
and access to the furthest nook,
but never ever,
to my safest, surest sanctum,
the heart of a true devotee.

Jammu - September 1990

Homeland

We live to share your grief
and die to suffer your agony
as they ravage you and defile
and drive us into exile.

In wilderness we wander
sans our souls
that we left behind,
nothing do our ears hear
but your heart-rending groans
and all that our eyes see
are the wounds that bleed thee.

Our memories have fled us,
what lingers is your ignominy.
Now our feet only seek the paths
that lead us back to thee.
Our speech ends in one refrain:
Homeland
as we take in hand the mighty pen
to fight the terrorist gun.

Dearer to us than all the worlds
we pledge to reclaim thee
as our spirit craves
the land of our birth
and the lips thirst
to kiss the earth
of that sacred land,
our homeland.

Jammu - 16 December 1991

The Spirit Does Not Accept Exile

Why doesn't the first flush of dawn
titillate the numbed senses
into wakefulness
and initiate me
to the call of duty?

Why don't the myriad temples
that abound here in exile
evoke fervour and devotion
and the intensity and passion
of a votary?

Why don't the ringing of bells
the chanting of *bhajans,*
the music of drums and cymbals,
draw me out of my muse
to rush for the daily prayer?

Why don't the Trikuta
and the Pirpanjal
beckon me to heights
where pure joy abides
as did the Mahadev
and the Shankaracharya hill?

Why doesn't theTawi,
as it flows in the fullness of rain
skirting this temple city,
hold me spellbound
as did the Vitasta.

Why doesn't the sun
when it rises and sets here
draw the mantra
'Om bhoor bhuva suvab'
spontaneously from my lips?

Why doesn't the blanket of night
envelop my tired soul
in the peaceful bliss
of dreamful sleep?

Why, though I eat and dress and live
and go about my chores as before,
does the spirit refuse to soar
as the present in exile
changes places with the past
and the mind drifts and roams
in the length and breadth
of my home of yore?

Jammu - 18 September 1992

Floral Adoration

In times gone by
when there was relative peace and plenty
and the happiness of security
back in my homeland,
often did I visit you
to offer my prayers,
and a floral tribute
to your grace.

I owned a garden then,
yet the flowers that I brought you
were not all my own.
I would pick some
that were on the decay
and others from the wild on the way-
common flowers and ferns,
green twigs and pine cones-
while I kept behind like the selfish giant,
the most fragrant and the best
at my own behest.
You accepted my offerings
with majestic grace.

Now in the thraldom of exile
and forced into tenancy
I often seek you
and offer flowers like before.
I pinch them from my landlord's lawn
early, before the dawn

or from the public park
away from people's gaze,
or buy them sometimes
from the flower seller at your door.
You accept them
with your benevolent grace
as in the days of yore.

I am dying to return,
my all-knowing, my forgiving lord,
to my dear native land,
my garden to reclaim,
so I could offer you
the choicest and the best,
flowers grown with my toil.
I know,
you will again accept them
with your eternal grace.

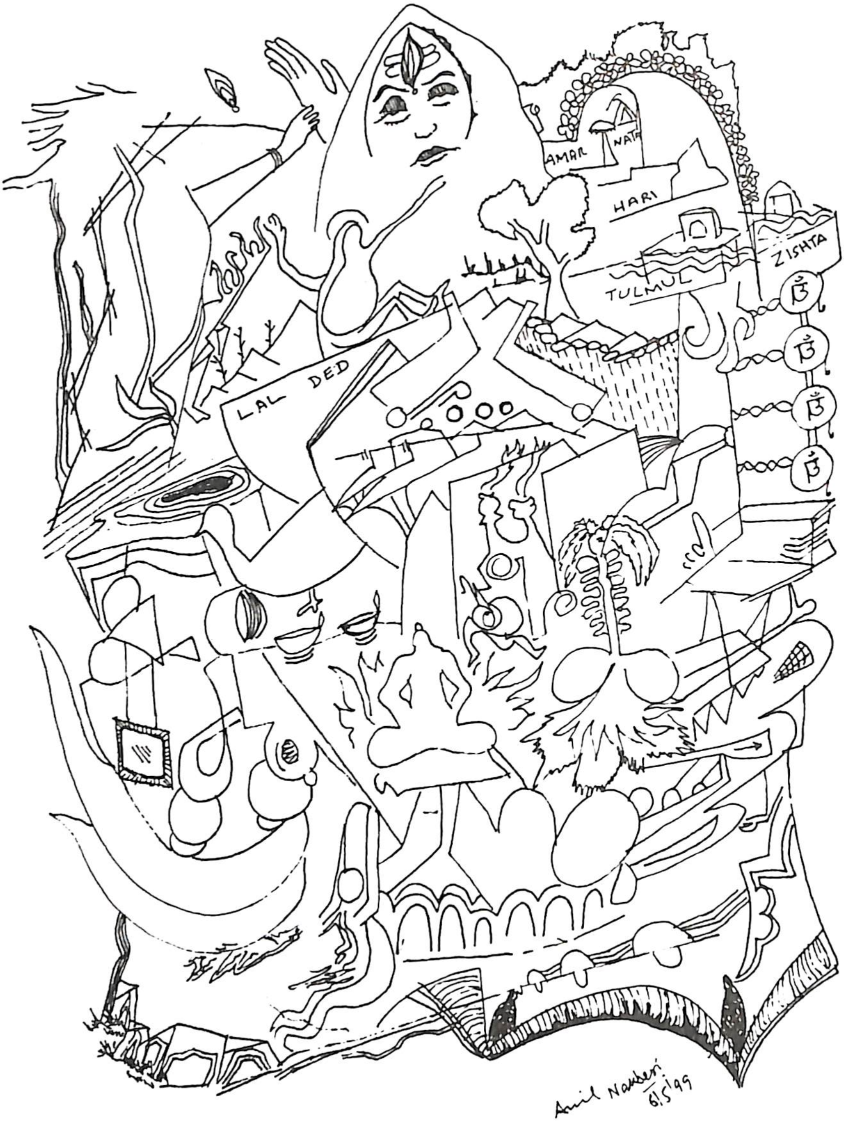
Jammu - 4 January 1993

Magnolia

Whilst yet a snow-white bud,
seated like a *lingam*
half hidden from mortal eye,
the secret of your grandeur
deftly settles on the senses.
As you slowly swell and unfold,
whipped up by your aroma,
the hormones burst the floodgates,
puffed passions peaking
from delirium
to convulsions
to trance
to the ultimate bliss.

The embers of quenched passion
char you from white to rust
and powder you to ash
as you lay bare your bosom
at the altar of love.

Jammu - June 1994



RE-CREATION

Re-creation

Lord, I have been banished
and so has been my whole race
forcibly torn away from you
and thrown into the wilderness of exile.
Like nomads we struggle for life
through wastelands and barren fields
and face the battering rain,
the pounding hail,
the howling, blinding dust storms,
the bone-chilling wintry nights,
the sweltering, stenching, drenching summer,
in snake pits and scorpion dens,
stalked by baying hounds,
under the prying gaze of vultures,
as spiders, ants and mosquitoes
join the death dance.

What sustains us is our faith
and your mighty presence within,
replenished by the legacy
that we carried with us-
your icons, idols, images-
and our endeavours to re-create
our lost paradise,
by raising replicas of the abodes
of your manifold avatars-
the temples of Zeystha and Zala,
Raginya and Sharika,

Lalla and Ropa-
and the all pervading Lord Shiva.

Jammu - 21 January 1993

Celestial Bridge

I never saw a rainbow
as big, broad and high
as here in the wilderness of exile
across the earth and sky;
a seven-hued bridge
over Pirpanjal and Trikuta
across the Tawi to the sacred Vitasta,
a superhighway on the biosphere
leading from exile here
to the motherland over there.

While the rampaging militants
that have taken over the valley
are busy burning bridges
and the bridges between people
have fallen apart in a breach of faith,
this rainbow here,
this celestial bridge,
beyond the reach of the predator,
is a divine intercession,
and a providential link
between man and man,
between the distanced and estranged,
between home and exile.

Jammu - 3 September 1995

Proxy Prayer

When you were so near
I hardly ever
bothered to step out and enter
your majestic realm
for a prayer;
nor did I care ever
to let the breeze inside my home
that breathed of you in full gear;
nor once bother
my eyes to peer at you, my dear
when you were manifest,
benevolent at your best.
I was immersed all through
in my own care and cheer
as far from you
as you were near.

Now
when I am banished from there
and out of bounds from anywhere,
there is a great upsurge
inside me, everywhere,
a craving to merge with you
and be near.

Till you call me back
to your altar,
I seek you my lord
through a proxy prayer

by an erstwhile friend, a worthy seer,
who, when he returns to his lair
in the city of Srinagar,
will pay you homage and my prayer,
which please accept,
my forgiving lord, my dearest dear.

Jammu - 6 February 1996

Reconciliation

A refugee camp in Jammu.
A Muslim from the valley visits his erstwhile Pandit neighbour.

Dear Pandit, dear brother,
dear friend, dear neighbour,
in leaving the accursed valley
you really proved the wiser.
You only lost your hearth and home
we our honour and shame;
you left behind your estate and farm
our pride hath come to eternal harm;
you escaped from fear and terror
we are condemned to unspeakable horror,
and while you give tongue to your thoughts
ours are tied in tedious knots
and truth is a casualty with us
as we speak in the militants' vein
against what our consciences ordain.

You live in a torn, tattered tent
yet your head is not bent
while ours are stooped in servitude
to the gun-toting multitude,
the *cordon-and-search* and the *crackdown*
is a slur to our honour, we must own,
but worse still
the swoop on our privacy
and the lust for meals, money, and maids

by the marauding boys with AIDS,
flouting all canons of religion,
destroying the movement ere it has begun.

It is now a free-for-all,
no longer the holy Jihad,
but a class war my pal,
and those who would sweep our floor-
blackers, bootleggers and more-
carry the gun and order us about
as paupers of yesterday
are today's lords with real clout,
the true *Mujahid,* alas no more,
but Arabs and Sudanis
Pakis and Afghanis.

In your flight from that hell
your intellect precedes you well
as ours goes pell-mell;
and the values we shared fled with you
our traditions and culture too;
and while the valley burns in hatred
its heritage fades from the face of the earth.
Our freedom has been snatched away
in the frenzy that holds sway.
As the foolish struggle comes to naught
we rue the Azadi that we sought.

Can we find a way out,
can we together, dear Pandit,
break ground
and turn the wheel around?

Jammu - 11 December 1996

The Kindling

If proof were needed
didn't this sixth exodus
in six centuries
clinch it
that intolerance will stay
and I will have to find my way
and settle away
from my homeland.

Yes, I am fatigued six times over
and desire nothing better
than to be left in peace here
in my temporary shelter.

Yet the answer to that riddle
kept evading me all these years
as to why my ancestors
returned to the valley
each time they were driven out
till this wizened old man
out from there
came to seek me the other day.
He held my hands
in his feeble yet warm grip
as he sat on the couch
and, before I could proceed,
thrust a gift in my hands
of roasted wheat flour
and baked paddy seeds,

and turning his palms towards the sky
invoked his Allah
to return me and mine
with dignity and honour to my homeland
where we could live together,
people of his faith
and mine,
for ever after.

Ever since,
the fragrance and flavour
of that traditional gift,
tinged with the nostalgia
of five thousand years
tingles my primordial urge
to return to my roots,
as my resolve grows every day
even with the full knowledge
that I may have to face
yet another exodus.

Jammu - 8 March 1997

Quantum Leap

Having rudely stabbed me
seven winters ago
you come here
seeking me in exile,
wanting to hold my hands,
embrace me tight,
left and right.

You are dying to open up
and speak about the insanity
of those seven years
and shed rivers of red-tinged tears,
tears of suffering,
mine and yours.

I hold back
but only for a moment,
as my vow to break from you
goes to pieces
and my reticence is flung to the winds
when I look into your liquid eyes
and read the mute language
of regret, remorse, repentance.
We rush into each others' arms
almost in a trance.

You have said
all that need be spoken,
and bridged the gulf of seven years

in that quantum leap
right into my bosom,
from where all is forgotten
and forgiven.

For it was not you that stabbed me
but a new creed of violence
born of hatred and intolerance
that failed to convert you
just as your violent deed seven years back,
failed to convert me.

Jammu - 12 April 1997

Time

Ah Time,
grown weary
racing along
all the time,
pray pause a little
to catch your breath,
give your sinews some rest
and look around,
and give me time
to rush back
to gather my childhood
and bring along my youth
that I left behind
in my race
to catch up with you.

Time,
dear time,
tarry awhile,
give yourself a break
and me a reprieve.

Jammu - June 1997

Mauj Kasheer

Two men helped her
into my consulting chamber
'What is her name?' I asked.
'Mother.'
'From where?'
'Kashmir.'
Sure she was *Mauj Kasheer*
attired in a *pheron,*
long and loose and embroidered,
and a head-gear high,
the *Qasaba,*
quaint and tottering well nigh.
'What ails thee, mother?' I asked.
'The pangs of separation, my son.
You left us behind,
to be abused, debased and undone,
and for my old eyes to witness
the loot and plunder,
blood, gore and murder.'
She raised her quivering fingers
frosted with the chill of countless winters
and clasped my hand as if in pincers.
'Eight years is a long time
and I can wait no more;
I came to this faraway clime
to discharge the debt
of motherhood,'
and she raised her *Qasaba*
and tossed it at my feet,

'Here, I beseech you,
come back to your mother
pray do.'
Mauj Kasheer has come
to her exiled son,
how long can I wait
to return?

Jammu - December 1997

What Unites Us

Why does it need bloodshed
to bring us together,
separated that we are
like the banks of a river,
the river of blood
that is our own,
fed by streams of blood
flowing down the centuries?
Our blood.

Blood is our bond,
it is our heritage,
we are the blood.
Yet we drift apart like the banks,
and the enemy strikes
and spills more blood.
Our blood.

We fight apart,
but wounded we fall together
in the same battlefield.
We die together,
or if we survive
we lie together
in the same ward.
Maimed, we recover
only to limp back
to our separate paths,

waiting for another tragedy
to unite us again.

Jammu - February 1998

Nausheen

Nausheen, the new snowfall,
born of the snow–dreams of exile –
of cosy huddles and cuddles
in kangri-warmed beddings;
of water-chestnuts baked on iron stoves;
of long-boots, *pherons* and pull-down caps;
of fish and beans and rice –
you come to us virginal white,
the first snowfall
in eight years of a parched life,
landing so soft so quiet
on our withered memories in exile.

Nausheen, the angel from the skies,
you bring the fragrance
of a forgotten winter's delight,
after an eight-year-long sultry night –
a morning of divine sight,
supernal, serene, white,
soft, smiling and bright.

Nausheen, the first snowfall
after eight snowless Shivratris,
you arrive to replenish
the denuded peaks of soul
and to water
the parched marrow of spirit.
Nausheen,
the offspring of exiled dreams,

born to the children of snow
in the snowless deserts of exile
you come to us –
the promise,
the resurrection and the life,
the continuum,
and the generational thrust
in our march
back to the snowy roots.

Alabama, USA - 19 July 1998

Pride of a Nation

As Sammy Sosa catches up
with McGwire, the champion
on the 65th home run,
the jubilant citizens of Dominican-
forgetting the destruction and ruin
that Georges has brought upon
this brave sporting nation-
throng the streets in a celebration
to honour their illustrious son.

The pride of a people
in their great son
who, through his sporting feat,
elevates them from depression
and helps boost their determination
to face the scourge and fight on,
reminds me of my exiled situation,
and reinforces my conviction
that no sacrifice or renunciation
is too great to reclaim my nation.

Alabama USA - 25 September 1998

It is Now

You ask me to wait
till the evening for my prayer,
now that the morn is over,
the temple door shut,
the echo of bells far away,
and urgent the call of the day.

I would wait
till the evening and beyond,
for my whole life,
if only I could break
this journey into the unknown.
For while I move on
I may not traverse this path again
and feel ever sorry
that your audience was denied
to an itinerant votary.

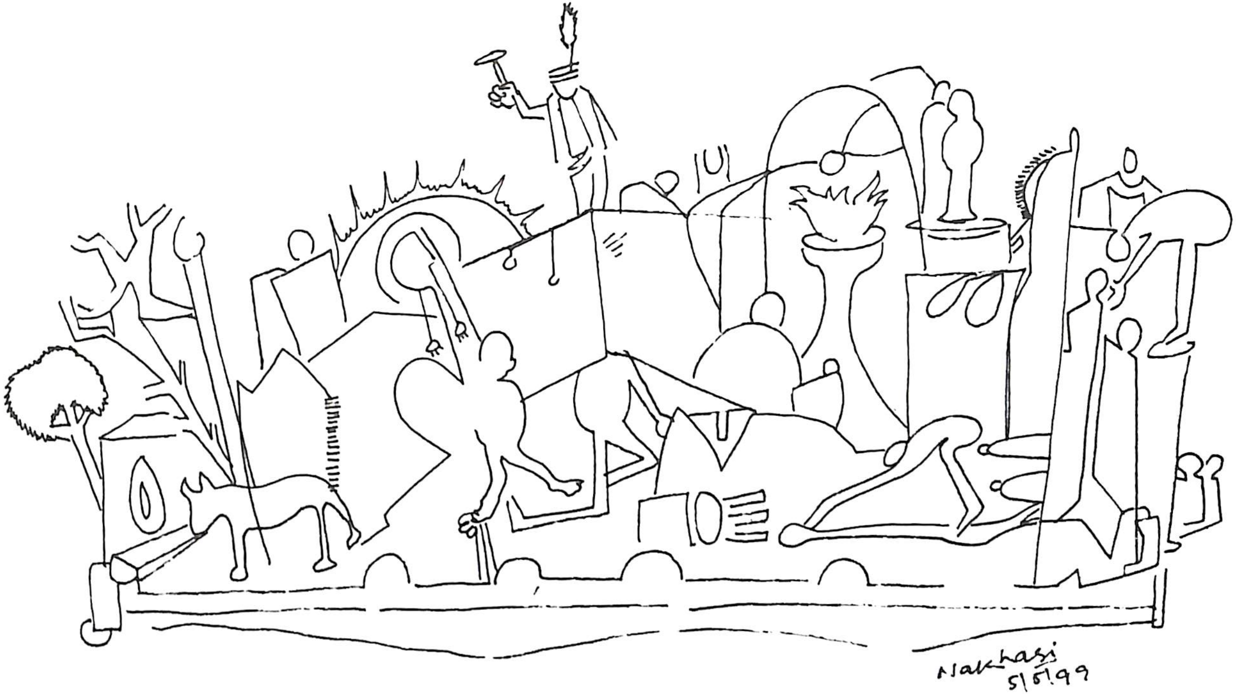
I could wait, no doubt,
till the evening and beyond,
into eternity,
if I knew the spontaneity,
the ardour and urgency
of my devotion, as of now,
would remain unabated.

The intensity of a flower
unfolding itself from its bud
will not stay the same

a moment later.
It is a moment which is now,
one moment that captures
the essence of my being
as I come to offer it.

Open thine portals,
accept me as I am,
now.
There is no recompense
for unrequited love.

Jammu - October 1998



ADITYA

Aditya

When dreams become reality
when visions materialise
when prayers are answered
when desires get fulfilled
you arrive
Aditya, my grandchild,
in our exile,
shining like the rising sun
from behind a veil of clouds
defying all predictions
of time, place and gender
to set your own calendar.

Your arrive, promised one,
with a mission
to drive away ignorance
and to still all violence,
to bring peace back in place
and restore us our space
in our native land,
our homeland.

Chicago, USA - 21 June 1999

Glossary

Aditya – the sun
Amavasya – 15^{th} day of the dark fortnight
Arda – half
Ashvin – seventh month in the lunar calendar
Azadi – freedom
Batta – Kashmiri Hindu, also called Kashmiri Pandit, (acronym KP)
Batten – Pandit female
Bhajan – devotional song
Cordon-and-search – an operation to flush out the terrorists in which the security forces throw a cordon around an area and seal exit routes before the search
Darshana – to manifest
Dale Batta – derogatory epithet for a KP - an euphemism for a coward and a weakling
Georges – name of a hurricane
Ghazi – a Muslim fighter against non—Muslims
Hizeb – Hizeb-ul-mujahideen, a terrorist group
Inshallah – with the will of god
Jagmohan – two-time governor of J&K State
Jansangh – a former political party espousing Hindu nationalism
Jihad – holy war
Kangri – fire pot to keep one warm in winter
Kehva – Kashmiri tea
Kheerbhawani – incarnation of goddess at Tulamulla
Lailahi-illalah – there is but one God
Lingam – the Hindu symbol of Siva – phallic symbol

Loo – hot wind that blows in the summer in Indian planes
KP – Kashmiri Pandit (Kashmiri Hindu)
McGwire – US baseball record holder
Mauj Kasheer – mother Kashmir
Migrant – exiled Kashmiri Pandit
Movement – the secessionist/freedom movement
Mujahid – holy warrior
Nizame Mustafa – the Muslim Utopia
Nausheen – The new (first) snowfall of the season
Octagon – the octagonal spring of Kheerbhawani
Paush – the 9th month in the lunar calendar
Phanda – traditional occult remedy for illness
Pitra paksha – ancestral fortnight
Qasaba – a Muslim female head dress in Kashmir
RSS – a Hindu socio-cultural organisation
Sammy Sosa – Dominican baseball player
Shradda – death anniversary
Siva – lord Shiva, also Shankara
Vena – a wild shrub held sacred and used as an offering
Yaksha – Yach in Kashmiri, a supernatural being
Yama – God of death
Zeystha – incarnation of goddess at the foothills of Mt. Mahadev in Srinagar
Zindabad – long live

Of Gods, Men & Militants

Dr K L Chowdhury

Kashmir - the land of snow-capped mountains and lush green valleys; the golden land of breath-taking beauty - torn asunder by the intermittent booming of guns; the exotic flower-carpeted expanses dyed a deep, dull red. This is how the author sees his beloved homeland and his cries of anguish echo through these pages:

We live to share your grief and die to suffer your agony

Indeed, the tumult of the exiled Kashmiri Pandits can never be stilled as long as the guns refuse to be silenced and brother fights brother with a hatred that is fanned by vested interests.

With pain and nostalgia writ large in every heart-rending poem, there still emerges a glimmer of hope that peace will prevail and his misguided brethren will lay down their arms and resolve to study war no more.

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